

## “Communion Unpacked” 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

### Introduction

- This morning as we spend a few minutes unpacking the Lord’s Supper, I want to begin with some history. Some of you may not know this but the Lord’s Supper is at the heart of what it means to be Free Church. In the mid 1800’s back in Norway and Sweden the state run Lutheran church was pretty much dead. However, there grew from within the church a grassroots movement of reformers. This group wanted to take the Bible seriously, they wanted to know what the Bible said and wanted to submit to scripture’s authority. They became appalled by what they observed during the Lord’s Supper. Believers and non-believers alike were served communion as members of the State Church.
- [A.T. Olson](#) the first president of the Free Church writes in his history of the Free Church movement, “that the ungodly were granted forgiveness of sins by a State Church priest who himself might often have been seen drunk, only to resume their immoral practices once the communion was over.” Many times “the man [or woman] who lived the life of the unrighteous and died the death of the unrighteous was declared to be in heaven because the deceased had been served communion in his dying moments. As one declared, ‘the priest rushed to the bedside of the dying sinner to serve communion--the sinner awakens a few moments later in hell with the taste of communion on his lips.’”<sup>1</sup>
- The issue then and even now is the significance of the Lord's Supper. It’s interesting; right now we are in the middle of a swing of the pendulum regarding the Lord’s Supper. Just recently I’ve read about a number of churches moving towards open communion—the very issue that cemented the Free Church movement 150 years ago.
- As we think about partaking of the bread and cup this morning the question for all of us is what does this ritual mean? Is communion a means of saving grace, a means of forgiveness? And the answer is no. Just because you’ve eaten the elements doesn’t mean you’re right with God. If you are trusting in a piece of bread and some juice to get you to heaven, one day you’ll find yourself in hell with the taste of communion on your lips. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone—not by anything we do including eating the communion meal. Those things are symbols. Don’t trust in the symbol. Trust in the person the symbol represents.
- As [John Stott](#) says, "The New Testament definition of a Christian is a person in Christ. It is necessary to insist, therefore, that according to Jesus and his apostles to be a Christian is not just to have been baptized, to belong to the church, to receive Holy Communion, to believe in the doctrines of the creed or try to follow the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. Baptism and Holy Communion, church membership, creed and conduct are all part and parcel of living as a Christian, but they can form and have sometimes formed an empty casket from which the jewel has disappeared. The jewel is Jesus Christ himself."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AT Olson, *This We Believe*, p. 269-270.

<sup>2</sup> Stott, *Authentic Christianity*, p. 191.

- This morning, let me remind you that the Lord's Supper is an invitation to come and receive the living resurrected Christ. This morning receive what Jesus has done for you on the cross; he has freely offered to forgive your sins. If you don't know or understand what it means to call upon Jesus as your Lord and Savior, if you haven't personally received what Christ has done for you—his death on the cross is your death to sin signaling your intent to serve a new master—then I ask that you respectfully refrain from the elements as they are passed. There's no shame in that. The only shame is in partaking of a ritual that you don't fully understand, or even worse, partaking when you don't really believe.

## Words of Warning

- As we begin to prepare our hearts to receive the elements let me read the words of warning found in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. *"Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."*
- This means, if you'll remember two weeks ago, that we must first reflect on the personal nature of Christ's sacrifice for us. We recognize his body broken for us. His blood shed for us. And we praise God that in spite of who we are and what we've done God still accepts us through the blood of Christ. And we celebrate. My friend [Lee Eclov](#) says this about the Lord's Supper. He's right. "This table of the Lord isn't where sinners find Christ but where sinners celebrate being found... Maybe some morning, instead of solemnly passing these trays, we should dance for joy. Maybe we should sing every born-again song we know. Maybe we should tell our "homecoming" stories and laugh like people who no longer fear death. Maybe we should ask if anyone wants seconds and hold our little cups high to toast lost sisters found and dead brothers alive."<sup>3</sup> This morning, by faith, I invite you to celebrate Jesus' victory over your sin and your death by his death on the cross.
- But more than just personally recognizing the words of 1 Corinthians 11 teach us that we must also recognize the body of the Lord before we eat and drink. *For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.* Recognize this. The body of Christ. Us. "Before we participate in this meal we are asked to examine ourselves in terms of our attitude toward the body of Christ." Have you been disconnected from the body, have you lived life apart from the body—have you lived independent of the community of believers this past week? If so, then confess and repent of your sin of individualism and receive the elements with joy. Are some of your relationships with Christ's members broken? Are you not speaking to someone? Are you jealous? Have you gossiped? Have you been cliquish? Have you met the needs of those in need this week? To partake of the elements without getting this right, with each other, is to sin against the body and blood of the Lord.
- Ushers and worship team if you'll come forward now. There are six things the Lord's Supper invites us to do: look back (to Christ's death), look in (in self-examination), look up (fellowship with God), look around (fellowship with each other), look forward (to Christ's

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<sup>3</sup> Lee Eclov, "The Sinner's Feast," submitted to [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)

return), and look outward (to proclaim God's word to others.)<sup>4</sup> As the elements are distributed, as the worship team plays, I want to invite you to pray. Reflect, think, ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind those sins that need to be confessed to our High Priest Jesus Christ. Get right relationally with each other. If you need to get up out of your seat and go to your brother or sister in Christ then please do so. Don't eat or drink without recognizing the body of the Lord. Prepare your hearts to worship. As Matthew 5:23-24 says, *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

- Let's pray. *Every priest goes to work at the altar each day, offers the same old sacrifices year in, year out, and never makes a dent in the sin problem. As a priest, Christ made a single sacrifice for sins, and that was it! Then he sat down right beside God and waited for his enemies to cave in. It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people. By that single offering, he did everything that needed to be done for everyone who takes part in the purifying process. The Holy Spirit confirms this: This new plan I'm making with Israel isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; This time "I'm writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts." He concludes, "I'll forever wipe the slate clean of their sins." Once sins are taken care of for good, there's no longer any need to offer sacrifices for them. So, friends, we can now—without hesitation—walk right up to God, into "the Holy Place." Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God. The "curtain" into God's presence is his body. So let's do it—full of belief, confident that we're presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Amen.*
- Before we commemorate the death of Christ let me read to you 1 Corinthians 11:23-24 and then say a few words. *The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me''*
- At the heart of the communion meal is the Passover celebration. And at the heart of the Jewish Passover is the death of a substitute. So that the destroying angel would pass over the houses of the Hebrews God asked them to slaughter a lamb without blemish in place of their firstborn—the blood from that lamb painted on the lintel of the door. When Jesus breaks the bread and gives thanks and says *this is my body which is for you* what he is saying is that he dies as our substitute. *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of he world.* This bread represents his body. It signifies his body and it's for you. It's personal. *For you.* He's the spotless lamb without blemish who takes upon himself your sins so that death might pass over you. As 1 Peter 2:24 says, *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...by his wounds we are healed.*<sup>5</sup> Jesus asks us to break bread in remembrance of his sacrificial substitution. That word *remembrance* means to call back again into memory a vivid experience.<sup>6</sup> Right now summon all your strength and actively remember what Jesus has done for you. Let's give thanks and eat.

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<sup>4</sup> Blomberg, p. 236 quoting Green, *Corinth*, p. 46-49.

<sup>5</sup> Clowney, p. 285.

<sup>6</sup> Reinecker, p. 426.

## Transition

Ushers if you'll please come forward again. Again, we're invited to look back (to Christ's death), look in (in self-examination), look up (fellowship with God), look around (fellowship with each other), look forward (to Christ's return), and look outward (to proclaim God's word to others.)<sup>7</sup> DISTRIBUTE ELEMENTS.

- Listen to the words of 1 Corinthians 11:25-26. *"In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*
- Did you know there is an Old Testament background to the Lord's Supper? At the establishment of the Mosaic covenant in Exodus 24:9-11 Moses read and the Book of the Law, sprinkled blood on the people and the book and then it says Moses and Aaron and the elders of Israel *saw God, and they ate and drank*. Communion is the sequel. Jesus calls it a new covenant meaning the old one established at Sinai is now obsolete, replaced.
- The covenant of law has been replaced by the covenant of grace. Communion is the covenantal meal like the one in Exodus 24 that fulfills what Jeremiah the prophet anticipated when he spoke of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:33-34. *"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*
- How? How does God do away with sin? No more sacrifices year after year? By the blood of Jesus. The book of Hebrews reminds us that *those sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year could never make perfect those who draw near to worship*. Those regular, repetitious blood sacrifices were a constant reminder of sin—that it hadn't been fully and finally dealt with. But Jesus *sacrificed for our sins once for all when he offered himself*.
- This day in history, November 18, 1978 in Jonestown, Guyana, [Jim Jones](#) persuaded his followers to drink a death potion. 913 members were left dead including 270 children in one of the sickest, most twisted, most perverted parodies of the Lord's Supper. With *this cup of the new covenant in Christ's blood* we don't drink our death; we drink Christ's death so that we might have life. This cup which proclaims the death Christ is for us an elixir of life. It is a promise that the problem of sin has been done away with once and for all. It is a promise that death has been defeated. It is a promise of eternal life. Let us now proclaim the death of Christ and rejoice in the life that we have in him. Come quickly Lord Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Blomberg, p. 236 quoting Green, *Corinth*, p. 46-49.